

# “The Short Arm of the Law” – Re-visited

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By Bill Merilees

Exactly 50 years ago this week (April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016) I arrived in Edinburgh for my second visit and my second brief stay with Chief Constable William Merrilees, OBE. My first stopover was nine years earlier, as a Canadian Boy Scout on my way to Jubilee Jamboree at Sutton Coldfield. This latter visit was at the very end of my nineteen month around the world hitch hiking adventure. In both instances I stayed a few days with Willie at his home in Leith, Edinburgh's port city.

“The Short Arm of the Law – The memoirs of Chief Constable William Merrilees OBE” should be **compulsory** reading for all Mirrlees, Merrilees, Merilees or whatever the spelling. Willie was one of those remarkable gentlemen – a role model and inspiration second to none!

During my October, 1964 to May, 1966 travels my father (bless him!) saved all my letters home. These past 19 months, from these epistles, I have retraced this journey on a large wall map, reliving this incredible experience and sharing the adventure with my family and grand children. The very last letter was written at The Glen, a cottage refurbished by Willie's Lothians & Peebles Constabulary along with his family and friends, on the Estate of Lord Glenconnor. To quote Willie, “A more delightful and secluded spot would be hard to imagine - - - a chuckling brook - - - wooded hills - - - heathery summits and a loch nearby. [a place where] the peace and serenity would be a joy to young and old”. For me, all was not 'rest and relaxation'; Willie had another idea in mind – the construction of a rock wall! On the Sunday, the wall finished, and before my departure home, Willie plus 9 other members of his Merrilees family arrived. To quote from my letter these Merrilees were “a paint-up, fix-up gang” making the cottage ready for those lucky enough to spend a few days here, in the coming months. A walk up onto the nearby moors was also part of this family visit, including negotiating a nearby fence.



One other telling memory of Willie's interest in the less fortunate occurred on the evening of my arrival. With Margaret, his grand-daughter, we had dinner in Leith and upon walking home Willie insisted “we had to make one call, to the house of a widow and her daughter [ill with a form of tuberculosis]. With a little persuasion Willie coaxed the daughter to play the piano. Blanche was quite the pianist and Willie wore her out playing songs he could sing”; what a bonny event!

Though only 5' 5" tall, missing all but one finger of his left hand (from an industrial accident when he was 13), a minimal education, and a humble background, Willie, through perseverance, singlemindedness of purpose and sheer hard work was able to achieve his goal

of joining the police. Thirty-nine years later, at age 65 and due to retire as Chief Constable, his superiors asked him to stay on another five years. When he wrote "The Short Arm of the Law", published in 1966, the last sentence reads, "I am still in harness, still fighting fit, and still Willie Merrilees – policeman". He formally retired in 1968.

During his life time, he received many accolades for his prowess as a policeman and dedicating his life to improving the plight of the under privileged. None was greater than his being made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) by Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, in 1959.



*Willie Merrilees victorious in Court following the 'great court battle' and the convictions in the Kosmo Club Case*